

New thinking in capacity development and quality assurance for effective Environmental Assessment

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me thank you for the opportunity to speak at this important event organized in such a beautiful place. Though the Central European University (CEU), which I represent here, is located in Hungary, we are, in fact, a very international institution. Our student and faculty come from most of the countries of the UNECE region and beyond.

Today I am going to summarize almost ten years of our experience in research, education and other capacity building in Environmental Assessment (EA) (by which I mean EIA and SEA) in Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia.

[Slide 2. Observed successes and failures of EA systems in CEE and EECCA]

Let me start with three observations on successes and failures of EA systems in this region:

1. The first observation is that successful EA systems are based on integration of international experience into existing functioning national institutions. Many countries of the region failed when they have tried to replace rapidly existing mechanisms by “perfect” legislation borrowed from the West. On the other hand those countries that tried to conserve existing arrangements disregarding international knowledge, trend and experience have not succeeded in building functional EA systems either.
2. The second observation is that effective EA system have broad support in societies, including from all levels of government, business, academia, NGOs and international organizations. These actors understand the meaning of EA and associate its success with their own interests. They are organized into extensive “policy network” capable not only of disseminating knowledge and experience, but also of political lobbying and defending the system if it comes under a threat. This was recently a case in one of the large countries of the region, where the EA system was almost abandoned due to its allegedly being “an obstacle to investments”. Only a very wide support for EA, including from businesses and NGOs saved EA.

In contrast, where EA is used and understood only by a small circle of experts, bureaucrats and, perhaps, international organizations, its value has been, as a rule, minimal.

3. The third observation is that effective EA systems are capable of learning, self-reflection and adjustment. They are what I called in one of the recent articles “Adaptive policy systems”. Our current understanding is that there is no such thing as an “ideal EA system”: what was “ideal” yesterday will not be ideal tomorrow. We should judge EA systems in countries in transition not only in light of which formal criteria they meet, but to which extent they are able to change. The systems which are not able to adapt in light of experience or changing external circumstances, that lack feedback are gradually becoming obsolete and irrelevant.

[Slide 3. Lessons for EA capacity development]

These three observations result in the following conclusions and recommendations on capacity development:

- Capacity development should be based on a balance between international and domestic experience, models and mechanisms;
- It should be directed to a range of social groups from where EA actors come...
- ... and it should specifically facilitate creation of networks and associations;
- Capacity development should depart from one-off efforts to systematic strategies. It will not only help focus them on the most pressing (and changing) needs, but also ensure their long-term sustainability. If individual capacity building workshops or manuals can be created by “external” actors, any significant long-term effect can only be achieved if domestic capacity-building “professionals”, such as universities are involved.
- Finally, an important aspect of capacity should be developed: capacity for monitoring, learning, evaluation and adjustment. This is something which has not received much attention in the past and I will spend the rest of my time talking about one aspect of evaluation and learning, namely about quality assurance.

[Slide 4. From quality control to quality management]

Quality control should be part of the overall EA quality management system, which also includes such elements as training, guidance, technical support, certification of experts, etc.

In relation to EA quality control usually means controlling the quality of either EA reports or the EA process. The second element is significantly more difficult than the first one.

[Slide 5. Quality control (QC) as a capacity development tool]

QC is verifying whether certain elements of the EA system meet the relevant expectations. It helps improving the quality of individual EA cases by identifying and remedying their deficiencies (e.g. inadequate methods used in impact studies).

Moreover, QC strengthens EA practice/system as a whole. It helps to develop shared expectations of what a “good EA” is in a particular country. Such expectations are important to establish a common language between different groups of EA actors. Such definition of a “good EA” can be used in education and training, in other words, the quality expectations can be “curriculized”. In providing EA training from Mongolia to Sweden I personally find asking students to “control the quality” of EA reports the best ever educational tool, which teaches young people how to tell a “good” EA from a “bad” one. Finally, QC can help identify the problems with the system as a whole, and, thus, serve as an element of a feedback loop, the need for which we discussed earlier.

To introduce QC, it is essential to have standardized quality evaluation frameworks. It may be recommended that capacity development within the Espoo Convention regime includes development and establishment of such frameworks in individual countries or internationally.

[Slide 6. Conclusions]

To conclude, let me restate the main points of this presentation.

First of all, successful EA systems are “dynamic” and able to reflect, integrated with existing institutions and supported by multi-stakeholder “networks”

Secondly, capacity development should facilitate such systems by promoting networking and ability for critical learning

Thirdly, Quality assurance is a capacity development tool which should be widely and systematically applied, relying on internationally standardized quality evaluation frameworks. It may be recommended that such a framework is developed within the Espoo regime.

Let me thank you for your attention and wish you a productive work at this Meeting!